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Do civil society consultations on sustainable development actually deliver democratization?

Auteur

Carole-Anne S nit

Assistant Professor of Inclusive Sustainability Governance, Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, Utrecht University

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In December 2016, Paris hosted the [Open Government Partnership Global Summit](#), bringing together public and private actors, both national and international, to exchange views on good practice of transparency in public and economic life, and to share tools enabling all actors to contribute to the definition and implementation of public policies. Civil society consultations are among these tools. Research has often focused on their role in producing more effective public policies, as well as their real [influence](#) on the definition of public policy. Today, with the development of digital consultation tools, a new question is emerging: how do these tools transform consultation processes and forms of participation? Do digital tools

enable the improvement of the democratic legitimacy of consultations, at a time when this legitimacy is being challenged (lack of representativeness, lack of impact on decisions, temporal separation from the decision)?

This issue is particularly relevant when focusing on international negotiations, where the democratic deficit is more significant than within our national representative democracies. Indeed, with globalization there has been a shift of decision-making from States towards mechanisms of global governance, where the formulation of policies avoids the accountability and consent of national populations. Between 2012 and 2015, the United Nations has nevertheless consulted nearly 10 million people in the framework of the negotiation process on the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#). It is on the basis of this example [1] that we will try to answer the question raised in this post.

How does digital technology change the representativeness of consultation?

Our study [2] shows that consultations that combine both online and face-to-face methods are generally more inclusive than those that take place exclusively online, or exclusively face-to-face. At the international level, the face-to-face consultations that we have studied have tended to favour the participation of actors from institutionalized civil society, which have major resources and mostly come from developed countries. During consultations of the Open Working Group on SDGs, 61% of participants took part on behalf of an international NGO or coalition of NGOs, while only 11% represented field-based organizations. In addition, 30% of participants were from the United States, while 64% were from developed countries, even though they represent only 17% of the global population. Consultations that take place exclusively online have a demographic participation bias, similar to that of face-to-face consultations. For example, 68% of Rio Dialogue participants came from developed countries. Conversely, consultations that combine online and face-to-face methods have made it easier to include people who are traditionally excluded from these processes, particularly young people from developing countries. The MYWorld survey has enabled the participation of a panel of individuals from 193 countries, including 78% who were under 30 (compared with only 18% for the hearings and 31% for online dialogues, although this section of the population represents more than half of the world's population), and of which 95% came from the Southern countries [3]. Thus, it is not digital technology alone that makes it possible to improve inclusion, but rather the complementary use of face-to-face and online methods.

A significant impact of digital technology: the invisibility of the interlocutors

Civil society consultations are not solely about enabling citizen participation, they also aim to encourage the accountability of the consultation organizers. However, at this global scale, we find that, in general, face-to-face consultations are more efficient than online consultations for participants (civil society) to obtain organizer (UN and State representatives) accountability. In the case of a face-to-face consultation, the organizers are readily identifiable and accessible and can be easily questioned by civil society on the positions they have publicly expressed, or on the accountability of the contributions of participants. Conversely, in the case of online consultations, the Internet platform often has the effect of anonymizing interactions, making it difficult to maintain an accountability relationship between civil society and representatives of international organizations and States. The issue of the intermediation produced by digital technology and the invisibility of the interlocutors thus significantly influences the democratic legitimacy of the consultations.

Designing a consultation process: what resources, actors and connection to the decision are necessary for a democratic process?

Although the global scale seems to be particularly complex for considering the democratization of decisions, the consultations studied here nevertheless provide lessons that could also be of interest at other scales. The design of the consultation process has a significant impact on its democratic nature. But beyond the choice of an online or face-to-face consultation, other factors relating to the design of the consultation influence its democratic legitimacy. This is particularly the case for human, financial and time resources allocated to the consultation. Intuitively, the more the consultation is extended over time, the more inclusive it will be. The impact of human and financial resources on inclusion is more uncertain. The example of the MYWorld survey indicates that it is possible to improve the inclusiveness of a consultation despite resource constraints when organizers develop partnerships with the public and private sector and some civil society grassroots organizations, and delegate its dissemination from the international decision-making centres to the national and local communities, thus reaching the populations traditionally excluded from these consultation processes. Finally, it must be remembered that improving the democratic legitimacy of consultations requires a strong political commitment on the part of the organizers. This commitment must be made clear through the development of a formal binding link between the consultation and the decision-making process for which it has been set up. This link could be realized, for example, through an obligation on the organizers to justify whether or not the results of the consultation are taken into account. The accountability would thus be increased. It is also very important to involve civil society in the design of the consultation: co-building the consultation programme and the participation rules can only improve the ownership of the process by stakeholders and, ultimately, inclusion. While digital technology does not in itself guarantee greater legitimacy of the consultation process, it may nevertheless have advantages in increasing the transparency and traceability of decisions related to its design. [1] Three consultations are discussed: the Rio online dialogues, organized by the UNDP and the Government of Brazil ahead of the Rio+20 conference in 2012, civil society hearings by the members of the Open Working Group on SDGs which took place between 2013 and 2014 at the United Nations in New York and the MYWorld survey organized by the United Nations and disseminated both on the Internet and on paper in 193 countries between 2013 and 2015. [2] Full results of this study are available here. [3] All the socio-demographic data from the survey are available on data.myworld2015.org